

RTF 313-2  
Spring 2000

# **Documentary Film: Contemporary Documentary: Issues and Aesthetics**

Tu Th 10-12  
325 AMS

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316 AMS  
1-2255  
Office hours Tu 3-5 and by Appointment

Documentary Film: Contemporary Documentary Issues and Aesthetics

Permission of instructor. Prerequisite 313-1 (Doc. History) may be waived for some students.

The usual discussion of documentary stresses the social documentary tradition. But in recent years many kinds of documentary have proliferated and the documentary mode has been redefined. This course will look at a wide range of contemporary documentary forms, ranging from successful theatrical documentaries such as *Fast, Cheap, And Out Of Control* to reality tv such as Court TV and the Food Network. Often PBS has been eclipsed in topic and boldness and quality by HBO. The World Wide Web is a new site of documentary activity, and even radio (with *This American Life* and other shows) has redefined the mode.

We will look at examples of new forms such as HBO's *Real Sex* series and *Taxicab Confessions*, sensational forms such as *Cops* and *World's Most Dangerous Police Chases*, grassroots forms such as community work, personal and autobiographical documentaries, the revival of story telling forms, and comic and fake documentaries. Throughout we will be investigating how the traditional concerns of documentary theory such as realism, authenticity, and commitment to public discourse have been redefined in contemporary times.

An important issue will be considering the voice of documentary, that is the rhetoric and discourse of the mode and how it has changed. For this we will look at some specific examples from the 1930s where the form of address is very obvious (and dated). Based on an analysis of this past form, we will interrogate what contemporary documentary discourse is, what its basic assumptions and styles are, and what that says about our own times.



All students will write two short papers concentrating on films shown in class. A longer project will be due for the final. In some cases, creative work may be submitted, usually with a written explanation or context. However, most people will write a research or critical paper. Grad students are expected to do a 15-25 page paper, which can be customized to their special interests or research interests. For example, the economics of reality tv could be examined by looking at a cable tv show or channel, or the relation of specific examples related to a social or political movement could be considered. There will be no late papers/projects. A final exam will be given during exam week to catch any stragglers.

Required reading:

Bill Nichols, **Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary**  
Indiana University Press ISBN 0-253-34060-8

## **Tu Mar 28**

course intro.

Who is speaking? 1. the personal story.

"Picture Me Rolling: Shomari's Story," pr. Shirley Jahad, Cecelia Vaisman and Shomari Kress. audio doc'y for broadcast, WBEZ, 30 min..

Documentary Time 1.  
exerpts from Court TV.

## **Th Mar 30**

Documentary Interviews and Places  
read:

Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," (handout)

**Halsted Street, USA** (David E. Simpson, 1998, 56.30)

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special event--Monday April 3, 3-4.30 Louis 118  
Craig Baldwin on mock documentary

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## **Tu April 4**

Interviews and Stories  
read:

Chad Raphael, "The Political Economy of Reali-TV." (handout)

**Taxicab Confessions** (HBO, 1 hour)



**Th April 6**

read:

Jeffrey Rouoff, "Conventions of Sound in Documentary" Cinema Journal #32:3  
(Spring 1993) pp 24-40 (on e-reserve)

Nichols, ch. 1, The Domain of Documentary

Interviews

**Stigmata**

Expressive Metaphors

**Papapapá** (Alex Rivera, 1996, 28 min.)

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First Paper due, by email to Chuck by noon, Saturday April 8

**•••Tu April 11 Class begins at 9 am in Louis 119**

Pure Document and Revelation

**Crossroads** (Bruce Conner, 1976, 36 min.)

**Lost Book Found** (Jem Cohen, 1996, 35 min.)

**Th April 13**

Long Form Documentary 1

read

Nichols Ch. 2 Documentary Modes of Representation

**An American Love Story** (selection) (Jennifer Fox, 9hrs. 50 min. (?) PBS.  
1999)

**Tu April 18**

Long Form Documentary 2

read

Nichols, ch. 3 Axiographics

**An American Love Story** (selection)

**Th April 20**

Long Form Documentary 3

read

Nichols ch. 4 Telling Stories with Evidence and Arguments

**An American Love Story** (selection)

**Tu April 25**

Long Form Documentary and PBS--discussion

read: Nichols ch. 5, Sticking to Reality

Personal Stories



**Saddle Sores** (Vanalyne Green, 1998, 20 min.)

**Th April 27**

read

Nichols Ch. 6 The Fact of Realism

Historical Compilation Documentary

**After Stonewall**

discussion of editing with Elizabeth Meister

Monday 9 am

description of final paper/project due by email to Chuck

••••**Tu May 2 Class begins at 9 am in Louis 119**

Documentary Voice

**Valley Town** (Willard Van Dyke, 1940)

lecture presentation on 30s documentry voice.

meetings with Chuck on final papers/projects

**Th May 4**

Documentary Voice

**Native Land** (Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, 1942, 88 min.)

May 9

**Four Little Girls** (Spike Lee, HBO)

May 11

**Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control** (Errol Morris, 1997, 82 min.)

Tu May 16

second essay due in class at start of class:

read: Julia Lesage on Finding Christa (handout)

**Finding Christa** (Camille Billops and James Hatch, 1991, 55 min.)

Th My 18

Socially Marginal, 1

**Brother's Keeper** (Joe Berlinger, 1992, 105 min.)

Tu May 23

Socially Marginal 2

**Black Tar Heroin: The Dark End of the Street** (Steven Okazaki, 1999, 55 min. for HBO)

Th May 25

Socially Marginal 3

**The Poet and the Con** (Eric Trules)



**Tu May 30**

home movies

read,

Kleinhans, "My Aunt Alice's Home Movies" (handout)

Nichols, ch. 7, "Pornography, Ethnography, and the Discourses of Power"

**Uncensored and Untamed: Pamela [Anderson] and Tommy Lee** (50 min.)

this screening is optional; part of the tape shows explicit closeup genital pornography

**Th June 1**

course evaluation

course summary

screening of creative work

all final papers and projects due...no incompletes, no extensions

Final Exam--

at scheduled time

2 hour essay exam.

**Essay no 1. 5 pp (1500 words)**

Choose a or b.

a. Discuss the concept of documentary voice and storytelling in one hour of *This American Life* (on WBEZ website).

b. Discuss the concept of documentary voice in **Hoop Dreams**. Your essay must refer to at least three significant articles on the film.

**Esssay no. 2 (5 pp. 1500 words)**

compare and contrast the documentary voice of **Four Little Girls** and **Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control**.

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